

Preserving the Fine Village: Commodification In Imagined Spaces

Preserving the “Fine Village”: The Commodification of
Rajasthani Folk Performance at Chokhi Dhani

Research Thesis

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The Palace of the Winds, Jaipur, June 2013

Abstract

Billed as a “tasteful and authentic symbol of ethnic village life,” Chokhi Dhani or “Fine Village,” opened in Jaipur in 1989 as a theme restaurant celebrating traditional Rajasthani cuisine, and has expanded to include a huge 22-acre resort and event park in its original location, as well as numerous other resorts across the country. Chokhi Dhani’s founder, Gul Vaswani, started the enterprise with the intent of preserving and celebrating Rajasthani folk culture in a tourist-friendly environment. The rapid transition of the Indian economy into a competitive global presence has led to an increase in attractions like Chokhi Dhani; contained, imagined spaces of a shared cultural past. But where do the performers fit within these freshly drawn “historical” communities? Seeking a more nuanced understanding of the Rajasthani folk performer’s identity in the context of cultural tourism in India, 21 interviews were collected, involving roughly 40 participants. These interviews were analyzed in concert with ethnographic field notes to paint a portrait of the current state of folk performance in Jaipur and perhaps also in India as a whole. While it is evident that folk performers rely heavily on the tourism industry to support the continuation of their craft, the future of their art forms deviate in relation to what the art form entails, forming a dichotomy along the lines of two types of performances: storytellers, and dancers/musicians. A particularly striking example of this was found in the stories told by kathputli walas, or Indian puppeteers. Also called into question is the idea that folk performance had a “pure” form pre-tourism, like the authenticity performed by Chokhi Dhani's careful representation of village life. Rather, the identity of Rajasthani folk performers evolves with the perceptions of what is authentic, placing them in a liminal space between “authentic” representations of the past and the present in which they very passionately practice their art.

I. Welcome to Delhi

I am at the India Habitat Center in New Delhi. More specifically I am at a book launch for the recently translated memoirs of Habib Tanvir, the renowned Muslim playwright. A generous relative has taken my interest in theatre research to heart and invited me along for the evening. My plane touched down less than two days ago. I am in a jet-lagged fog of mild comprehension. Delhi is muggy and hot, but not yet unbearably so. That will come later.

The evening's activities begin, first with a conversation about the memoirs with the translator and the playwright's daughter. The talk is conducted entirely in Hindi, a language that holds so much weight in my mind, the language of my family, my heritage, 50 percent of my DNA. The language that is cemented in my mind as some sort of all-access-pass to a "real" Indian identity.

And yet I don't speak it at all. I am, in my own mind, a fraud. My drowsy consciousness stirs with the repressed guilt of a personality and life formed in stark opposition to "traditional" Indian culture.

I try to perform the part of alert listener, but I can't help it. I fall asleep. Jet lag is a heavy sedative.

I'm startled awake by the powerful strains of a sitar and the gentle burble of a tabla. My guide for the evening explains that Habib Tanvir's daughter, Nageen, is a famous classical musician. It's a beautiful concert, and the audience is appreciative. They are Delhi's cultural elite, marked by the elegance of their jewel-toned salwar kameez' and rough spun silk kurtas.

Afterwards, mingling. I am introduced to a kind older gentleman whose position I don't quite remember. He is important, certainly, that much I can recall. He politely inquires about my research and I explain, with enthusiasm, my involvement with Chokhi Dhani.

"Chokhi Dhani is...silly. A tourist attraction. You should stay here in Delhi, where the theatre is."

"Why would you want to go there?"

Introduction

My first experience with Chokhi Dhani came three years prior to the start of this project, while visiting my cousins in Delhi. I entered Chokhi Dhani for the first time as a tourist, participating in all the necessary activities of the experience: getting mehndi on my handsⁱ, riding an elephant, ingesting a comically enormous traditionally Rajasthani meal, and most importantly, absorbing performance after performance of folk dances, songs, and stories. It was on the superficial level a mindless evening of fun, but I left feeling fascinated and somewhat bemused by the careful execution of “tradition” that Chokhi Dhani perpetuated. The entire experience presented itself as a caricature of the India that people excitedly describe to me when they learn my ethnicity: an India of quaint, agrarian simplicity with tasteful folk art on the walls and a heady, vibrant mix of abundant colors and spices—and of course the aforementioned elephants. This was not an India that I had ever come into contact with, spending most of my time in the apartments of relatives and family friends. In fact, I’m not sure it’s an India that even exists outside of the borders of this facsimile of everyday Rajasthani life.

Nevertheless, Chokhi Dhani is billed as a “tasteful and authentic symbol of ethnic village life.” The attraction first opened in 1989 as a theme restaurant celebrating traditional Rajasthani cuisine, but has since expanded to include a huge 22-acre resort and theme park in its original location, as well as numerous other resorts across the country (“Company Profile”). The company has even started a franchise, calling for associates to open their own locations wherever there is viable land (“Become An Associate”). Chokhi Dhani’s founder, Gul Vaswani, started the “Fine Village” with the intent of preserving and celebrating Rajasthani folk culture through fun and profit, but the concept of cultural preservation through a successful franchise raises complicated questions of identity and the commodification of indigenous heritage—is a tourist

attraction the antithesis of culture, as the theatre elites of Delhi seem to think, or does it contain key pieces of cultural vocabulary? Is the increasingly commodified world of folk performance facing stagnation in the face of tourism, or does Mr. Vaswani's employment of these folk artists offer an alternative narrative of culture that evolves from its quaint premise into an entirely new lore?

These were the questions I set out to answer upon my return to Chokhi Dhani last year, in the blistering heat of Rajasthan in June. Over the course of ten weeks I recorded ethnographic data in the form of 21 interviews with roughly 40 participants in the Jaipur region of Rajasthan. The interviews were loosely structured, short-term interactions that span about five and a half hours total and were conducted with artists and administrators at Chokhi Dhani as well as artists operating in and around the Jaipur area. The transcripts of these recorded interviews, coupled with ethnographic observations while in the field, make up the majority of the data for this study. Although the bulk of the thesis will be given to analyzing the performers' experience of Chokhi Dhani, interviews with other Jaipur area performers are utilized to help draw out the patterns of experience present in the lives of Rajasthani folk artists.

Before these questions can be answered however, it is necessary to situate the data collected for this study within the previous theoretical context of tourism as an academic discipline. Modern theory contends that tourism is a multifaceted signal of the times that "cannot be disaggregated from globalization as a complex social phenomenon" (Burns and Novelli xxvii). The link between globalization and tourism is further addressed through the condition of post-modernity, or the global paradigm shift from production to consumption as the "focal point in the organization of lifestyle" (Rojek 51). In a globalized economy driven by consumer interests, the tourist represents "a new emblem of the postmodern condition" (Bauman, n.p.)

because of their unique place in the hierarchy of economic power as both a consumer of leisure and of business, especially at the local level (Lyon and Wells 3). Postmodernity in the form of tourism therefore constitutes an essential departure from the structured urbanization and industrialization of social space as dictated by the norms of modernity in David Harvey's discussion of the subject (10). Instead of following the rigid hierarchies of modernism, tourism in the postmodern-era exists in a fragmented social space that allows for "the development of new tourist spaces that recycle elements of the past, and pastiches of other cultures" (Meethan 25), similar to what Chokhi Dhani represents in the Indian tourism context.

The logical extension of this conception of tourism is furthered in Kevin Meethan's theories surrounding authenticity and heritage. In an age of such high demand for cultural tourism, exhibits showcasing a particular culture are often constructed out of an imagined past or heritage that is presented as having the "definitive, essential characteristics" of a particular culture. But elsewhere that same culture can be constructed to have entirely different "essential" traits (99). Imagined historical spaces thus create multilayered heritage narratives or "heritage dissonance", indicating that the value of heritage is not static, but rather "always a product of interaction" (Salazar 37). This transitive idea of heritage is integral to understanding the value it holds in modern society as both a cultural and economic factor, as cultural heritage is of an intangible nature, but the degree to which heritage is desired (24) exists in the tangible, economic realm of commodities. Thus Gul Vaswani of Chokhi Dhani saw the opportunity to create an imagined heritage for both its cultural significance and economic benefit.

As an economically significant cultural heritage space, Chokhi Dhani then falls under the domain of a "symbolic economy", as illustrated by S. Zukin:

...the symbolic economy features two parallel production systems that are crucial to a city's material life: the *production of space*, with its synergy of capital investment and cultural meanings, and the *production of symbols*, which constructs both a currency of commercial exchange and a language of social identity (Zukin 23-24)

This “symbolic economy” model applies beyond the bounds of Chokhi Dhani as well, extending to the social identities of the other Jaipur-based performers interviewed.

This leads me to the political dimension of cultural tourism. Although postmodernity moves beyond the identity of the nation, cultural tourism can still be identified as having a political facet to its importance on the international level. The state of Rajasthan is one of the most prominent tourism-based economies in India today, with Jaipur alone bringing in over 1.5 million tourists in the 2012 season, and Rajasthan as a whole welcoming 30 million tourists that same year (Rajasthan Ministry of Tourism, 50). Cultural heritage sites like Jaisalmer, Jaipur, and Pushkar provide a wealth of indigenous artistic mediums including multiple genres of performance, from the somewhat infamous snake charmers of Kalbeliya dance to the skilled charm of the puppeteers known as kathputliwalas.

These important performance disciplines, while grounded in the “folk” genre, are tied intrinsically to the public identity of Rajasthan as a state. In my experience as both a researcher and tourist in Jaipur, two ideas of what Rajasthan represents were emphasized to me: royalty and folk artistry. Tourist materials about the history of Rajasthan espouse a “medieval history as rich in tales of valour and chivalry as it is in folklore” with modern craftsman and folk artists linked in the history of the region to recollections of the glory days of the Rajput kingsⁱⁱ (Singh 5). This is not to say that equating modern day artisans with storied military rulers is at all misleading.

Certain types of traditional dance are foregrounded in courtly spectacleⁱⁱⁱ, kathputliwalas sing the praises of famous warriors of the past, and musicians today take up residence in former palaces and forts around the city to perform and hone their craft. But this connection between warriors and artisans in the tourism industry's rhetoric about what constitutes "Rajasthan" as a state is a careful equation of military and political might with the artistic expressions that stemmed from those former, Golden Age regimes and still make up a large part of Rajasthan's economy today. Perhaps the economic might wielded by Rajasthan's 21st-century tourism industry is the modern equivalent of the Rajputs of days past and their conquering abilities?^{iv}

The challenge, then, in this study is to situate the theories of social, political and economic cultural tourism within the identities of the folk performers that help to perpetuate the imagined space of "true" Rajasthani heritage.^v How do they perceive themselves in light of the tourist industry's rapid transition to a necessary part of the Indian economy?

Of key importance to this study is the space in which Chokhi Dhani's performers operate. The structure of the park is such that the performance space is fraught with the tension of how to present itself as "authentic" for the modern tourist's gaze while still denying those markers of authenticity that would detract from the experience. The first section will incorporate the observations made about the presentation of Chokhi Dhani, the divide between the resort and the theme park, and the extravagant meals offered to patrons. This is integral to marking out the space in which these performers are operating, and how that might shape their identity in concert with tourism.

The second and third sections of this study will be split between two genres of performance: those performance disciplines incorporating dance and music, and those incorporating storytelling and music. Essential distinctions in the patterns of experiences for

these two types of performers were marked out in the initial transcriptions of the work, and will be explored further through separate analyses of their representations of self and of the future of their art forms. The fourth and final section of this study deals with the main question of this piece: where is the Rajasthani folk performer situated within the confines of a postmodern, commodification-based tourist economy? Using the responses documented in the previous two sections, some idea of the identity of a modern day folk performer can be constructed, adding an alternate dimension to the theoretical knowledge already in existence surrounding cultural tourism.

Also important to understanding the significance of this study is the limitations put on the research conducted, especially given the socioeconomic status of many of those interviewed. Utilizing texts culled from the realm of subaltern studies, a discussion of voice and representation will follow the conclusions of this piece, as well as recommendations for further research. Interspersed among these sections of the thesis will be small narrative moments of the ethnographer's experience of and relationship with India, as an experiment in the discipline of performative academic writing. These have been labeled with Roman numerals.

II. The Pink City

Rajasthan is mostly desert. And it's June—the hottest month of the year.

I've never felt heat like this. My mother told me before I left the states:

"You have never felt heat like India in June."

Yeah, okay Mom. I think I can handle it. (That's the thing about moms: they are—perpetually, annoyingly, sometimes inexplicably—always right.)

Emerging from the air-conditioned train, I'm like a monster from a cheesy B-movie, hissing as soon as the light touches me.

It's a meandering heat, a heat that reaches in and slows all the mechanisms of my body down one by one until I am functioning at less than half of my full capacity for thought.

I don't even notice sweat after a certain point. Or the need for water. In heat this extreme, water doesn't really taste the way it's supposed to. The plastic bottles that my tourist-friendly water source comes from remind me that I don't belong. My stomach will always betray me.

I know I will be severely dehydrated before the week is over, and it won't be anyone's fault but my own.

"I'm not responsible enough for this. Why am I here? Why didn't somebody stop me?" I'm annoying even myself with this internal whining.

Panic sets in. Panic and heat in one boiling body.

I can already feel my stomach churning—a combination of stress and the inevitable traveller's diarrhea. "I'm a fraud," I think to myself, for the thousandth time that day. Not the last by any means.

Research begins tomorrow. I don't sleep.

"Welcome to Jaipur. Is this your first time here?"

Section 1: Touring Chokhi Dhani

As I first came to Chokhi Dhani as a tourist, it only made sense to recreate the tourist experience in an additional tour during my second visit to Jaipur as a researcher. Coming back to the experience with fresh, inquisitive eyes presented a similar scene, but now with new questions—and slightly less restricted access.

Chokhi Dhani is located a little ways away from the metropolitan area of Jaipur, along a main road. Lines of auto rickshaws, government Ambassador cars, and air-conditioned silver tourist taxis sit neatly in front of a cheerfully painted archway that leads into the main area of the park. There is a ticket booth inside a thatched-roof hall, with prices written in chalk on a slate slab. The tickets range from 500-700 Rs. per person, giving the recipient entry to the park and access to a traditional Rajasthani buffet meal. After passing through the ticketing hall, men in white cotton kurta pajama and bandhani turbans^{vi} greet us with the colloquial “Ram ram!” signifying our entrance into the “village.” A traditional beverage is offered as a welcome into the space at a stall at the front of the park. I am forbidden from drinking it, as it is made with tap water. In a comical twist, this denial of the “welcome” signifier, brought on by my body’s inability to assimilate with the local bacteria, keeps me firmly in my role as ethnographer, distant and close, near and far, outsider and participant.

The need for Chokhi Dhani to express itself as a facsimile of village life is grounded in the newfound economic importance of cultural heritage across the global tourism industry. In their seminal work on the subject, Brian S. Osbourne and Jason F. Kovacs discuss the fiscal intelligence of investing in heritage as a selling point, noting “a combination of nostalgia for an imagined past, economic and cultural insecurity, and a growing demand for the consumption of entertainment” (928) as factors in the growth of heritage tourism over the past decade. The

numbers speak for themselves, with estimations from the United Nations coming in at 1.6 billion international tourists by the year 2020—who will no doubt be welcomed by an industry already accounting for 215 million tourism-based jobs worldwide^{vii} (927).

Chokhi Dhani was created with incredible foresight into this “niche tourism” market, a term coined by Marina Novelli to encompass the unique brand of experiential tourism that requires participation and connection from the tourist to be truly marketable—and profitable. The layout is such that I feel as though I am walking into something else, a place outside of time, with plenty of sensory distractions to help me forget that I’ve just paid to enter this quaint space. Everything about Chokhi Dhani’s design is meant to evoke comfort, from the welcoming beverage to the “authentic” country greeting^{viii} and garb of the tour guides and park manager. There is comfortable seating everywhere and helpful signs posted in both English and Hindi to guide visitors through the park.

In this way, Chokhi Dhani shows signs of a tourist attraction straddling the appearance of the real and of fantasy, two diverging forms of tourism. Whereas “the origins of modern tourism are to be sought in the pursuit of authentic cultural origins,” a new pursuit has arisen for the casual traveller to escape into “constructed attractions that move away from authenticity into the realm of the fictive or the fantastic” (Osbourne and Kovacs 929). While the colloquial design elements and attention paid to what demarcates “traditional” Rajasthani culture and cuisine gives the air of an attraction committed to a version of constructed authenticity, the performance spaces themselves are so elegant as to transport the space into a different realm entirely.

There are round raised dais’ everywhere that mark out the spaces where performances take place. The area is a bit like one of the “living museums” you might see stateside, with the artists always ready to begin their routine, as soon as a large enough crowd has gathered. Hand

painted signs bearing the stern yet polite message “PLEASE DO NOT ENCOURAGE TIPS” hang in strategic locations around each platform, lifting the viewer gently out of their perceived experience. But the majority of performances happen at Chokhi Dhani after dark, with lamps and candles lighting the dais’ in a romantic, rosy glow that glints off the mirrored clothing of the dancers and the silver-accented instruments of the musicians. The swirling, evocative dances, bright costumes and heady strains of folk music are enough to draw you back into the perceived village festivities. Audience participation is encouraged. There are elephant and camel rides and mehndi artists, typical tourist attractions that seem to fit within the colloquial setting Chokhi Dhani attempts to convey for its guests. And yet idiosyncratic elements exist everywhere—a giant plaster dinosaur to usher you into the “prehistoric” section of the park, a Ferris wheel, and merry go round, a stall selling cheap plastic toys, and a giant cell tower, butting out of the middle of the park.^{ix}

Although the fantastical element of Chokhi Dhani’s allure is present in the nighttime performances, it is difficult to ignore the seemingly “tacked-on” elements. They are certainly characteristic of village life, instead existing solely for the entertainment of the park’s visitors, and the increased monetary gain of the park’s owners. Perhaps this is the “pastiche” that Kevin Meethan speaks of, referred to in the Introduction of this work. These fragmented areas of the park are then the result of “a shift from modernist to postmodernist forms of spatial development” (25), with the modernist hierarchy of space—characterized by a strict differentiation between leisure and work—replaced, at Chokhi Dhani, with “a more fragmented and less uniform pattern...matched by consequent changes in patterns of consumer preferences, within which diversity, difference and eclecticism appear to be the key elements” (26).

It is relevant to note that in observations from my translator and from Indian relatives and acquaintances to whom I showed my pictures of Chokhi Dhani, the pictures of the toy stall and Ferris wheel were demarcated as more “Indian” spaces, or pieces of Chokhi Dhani that may have been constructed with Indian visitors in mind, while in my observations of the space, the foreign tourists left the toy stall and Ferris wheel largely untouched, gravitating instead towards what they might have deemed the “authentic” areas, those of the performers, mehndi practitioners, and elephant rides.^x These innocuous distinctions are potentially valuable indicators for Chokhi Dhani’s target audiences—certainly foreign tourists are a main draw for the space, but Indian patrons are sought after and marketed towards as consumers of Chokhi Dhani’s offerings as well. This expresses an inclusivity sometimes forgotten at other Indian tourist attractions, and a need to recognize the growing power that Indian middle-class consumers hold in the tourism industry, and in the Indian economy overall. But acknowledgement does not necessarily equal equality, as the tour demonstrates later on...

After the performances comes the meal. The eating area consists of two price ranges. 500 Rs. will get you cushions on the floor of a pavilion, with your own individual wooden table-tray to eat off of. Our guide informs us that for 700 Rs., many Western tourists prefer the indoor candle-lit buffet. We sit outside. Our meal, the “Rajasthani thali” consists of various heavy curries, dals or lentil dishes, and the heavy, fatty breads and side dishes of a traditional desert-friendly meal. Attempting to eat it in the heat of June is exhausting, and the jovial cries of the servers to eat “More! More!” become direct challenges to actually finish the mountain of food in front of us. My translator and I eat our fill, but as my city guide to Jaipur will later tell me, “None of the city’s young people are eating dal baati churma.”

An entire—and entirely different—study could be written based solely on the performativity of the meal at Chokhi Dhani. It is almost comical in its quantity and richness. The aforementioned dal baati churma, fondly but derisively dismissed as a dated choice of meal by my youthful tour guide, consists of heavy, dense balls of wheat bread served with the “dal”, or ghee-saturated curried lentils, and the “churma”, a blend of crushed baatis and sugar that is sprinkled over top of the entire meal, with some added ghee for good measure.^{xi} This type of cuisine is necessary for a desert-dwelling villager, given the extreme temperature fluctuations and lack of certainty regarding resources, but the meal is almost archaic to the average, middle-class stomachs of Chokhi Dhani’s patrons. This, in some way, gives it the air of authenticity that a leg of mutton might lend to the proceedings at a Renaissance Fair in the West. I wonder if the performers, coming as they do from rural communities, are accustomed to this type of meal? Does the meal reflect a richer, spiced-up version of what would be eaten in the village, or is it more or less the same type of fare? These questions remain unanswered, for another researcher to come along and take up.

Having finished with the amusement park area, our guide for the evening now takes us to the resort area of the park, with air-conditioned villas and lavish mirrored lounges. In my time observing the goings-on at Chokhi Dhani, it is evident that this area is reserved for upper-class patrons. It is, after all, a luxury resort, with all the amenities that are expected of such an undertaking. Being American, it is not questioned whether I can afford the resort area. We are taken for a tour regardless. The same happened when I was here three years ago. I’m not insulted or scandalized. It’s just good business. The neat little “huts,” for lack of a better word, are tucked away in the side of the park, their candlelit walkways winking playfully out towards the park area. A kingdom within the Village.

In this area Chokhi Dhani reveals a stratification that both defies and promotes an inherent understanding of the park's goals. The resort is the shinier, even more carefully curated version of the "Fine Village," meant in no way to be authentic, but certainly to provide the illusion of rustic charm for the wealthy residents of the luxury villas—although it seems necessary to point out the rich irony in having a prettier, more luxurious version of the "village" operating alongside the rustic, perceived-as-authentic version. So if we choose to view the resort as the idealized version of the park, and the park as the idealized version of real life, what is being amplified for the consumer? The level of comfort available is in inverse proportion to the level of "authenticity" offered by the experience of Chokhi Dhani.

As I have come to India during the low season for international tourism, I see only one group staying in the resort area during my time in Jaipur. The group consists of all men, probably from either Europe or North America, apparently feeling adventurous enough to venture out into the 120-degree heat of Rajasthan in June. They cross back and forth between the resort and the park several times throughout their evenings. I watch them come and go, unrestricted in their access to both areas. The stratification of the park thus appears to me to exist in quadrants of audience: 1. The resort-goers, with unlimited access to the park and to the luxury of the resort, 2. The general park attendees, who have access to the park and the dining area, 3. The drivers, who must wait outside the walls of the park and the resort, and 4. The performers, who appear and reappear in various capacities over the entirety of the park, but with the agency of employment, not of complete free will. And of course there is me, the intrepid researcher, poking her head into the kitchens to see how the meals are prepared, wandering through the entirety of the resort and park areas, given an all-access pass to the goings on of Chokhi Dhani by the accommodating administrators. My ability to do all of this hinges, of course, on the will of Chokhi Dhani's

owners, but the privilege I am afforded is not lost on me. I am closer to category one than any other. I am, perhaps a little reluctantly, situated most strongly with the white men roaming the Chokhi Dhani grounds in plaid shorts and polo shirts.

I am anxious to begin interviewing the performers, as questions of access, agency, and artistry muddle my thoughts on the drive home.



The Ferris wheel at Chokhi Dhani, June 2013

II. Delhi Belly

There's something to be said for the inevitability of illness when I travel in India.

As soon as I step foot in the Delhi airport, it's countdown to when—not if, or even how. Just a slow march to when, when, when.

When will I get sick?

When will food lose any and all appeal?

When will I visit the doctor? When will the never-ending cycle of strange pills begin?

I'm ashamed of my stomach's inability to keep things together. Half my DNA is from this country, why is it rejecting the food, the air, the spice so violently?

I try to blame my parents for not making me eat spicy food as a child, but that doesn't make sense. Everyone tells me not to worry—it's summer, everybody gets sick, it's nothing to be ashamed of.

But I seem to think I know better. My overactive brain knows this is penance for all the identities I've failed to display as an Indian American woman. The nose ring isn't fooling anyone.

I'm the typical tourist, trapped on the toilet.

I am a complete outsider.

From the inside out.

I lose ten pounds. In a twisted way, I am pleased to be so skinny. But it's giving me away.

It's me, giving way.

Toast, yogurt, rice, more toast.

"You're so lucky! Ten weeks...I love Indian food!"

I'm a traitor.

"Your train for Patna leaves tomorrow. Are you well enough to eat?"

Section 2: The Dancers and Musicians

Finally we come to the performers themselves. In the interviews I conducted, it eventually became clear that patterns emerged along lines of genre, splitting the interview participants into two camps: on one side of the experience were the dancers and musicians, and on the other, the “storytellers” who will be expanded upon in the next chapter.

At Chokhi Dhani, there are two main types of folk dance considered to be characteristic of the region, Kalbeliya and Ghoomar—although the interview responses given by many artists at Chokhi Dhani indicate there is significant overlap in who practices these art forms, as they both come from desert tribes in the region. The more famous of the two forms is Kalbeliya dance, described by UNESCO on their Intangible Cultural Heritage website:

Today, women in flowing black skirts dance and swirl, replicating the movements of a serpent, while men accompany them on the khanjari percussion instrument and the poongi, a woodwind instrument traditionally played to capture snakes. The dancers wear traditional tattoo designs, jewellery and garments richly embroidered with small mirrors and silver thread. Kalbeliya songs disseminate mythological knowledge through stories, while special traditional dances are performed during Holi, the festival of colours. The songs also demonstrate the poetic acumen of the Kalbeliya, who are reputed to compose lyrics spontaneously and improvise songs during performances. Transmitted from generation to generation, the songs and dances form part of an oral tradition for which no texts or training manuals exist. (“Kalbeliya Folk Songs and Dances,” n.p.)

Even from a description as dry as the archival preservation offered on UNESCO’s site, it is clear that Kalbeliya has become such a popular emblem through the vibrant beauty of its aesthetics

and movement. And upon seeing the Kalbeliya performers at Chokhi Dhani, I must agree that their interpretation of the movement of snakes is incredibly beautiful, the swirling silver threads of their black skirts and jingling of anklets make for an evocative display of serpentine power.

There are multiple troupes at Chokhi Dhani who mention Kalbeliya as being part of their repertoire, but only one family in particular that performs the style itself as part of the park's round robin lineup of showcases during any one evening. They are the very first family I interview for this piece, a smaller central family unit than most that will come later—mother, father, and two young girls. Throughout the course of the interview, the mother and father do the majority of the talking; picking up a rhythm of sorts where they echo each other's sentences back and forth, back and forth, a constant stream of substantiation. Their daughters' ages are not clear, and their shy interjections into the conversation cannot, unfortunately, be quoted.

I learn that this particular family has been performing with Chokhi Dhani for twenty years, brought from a farming community in Indore by an unnamed, deceased relative. They are a well-established part of the performance community at Chokhi Dhani, but their origins belie the presentation of the park as “authentic” Rajasthan. In asking the mother where she learned Kalbeliya dance, an unexpected answer irrevocably changes the course of this research^{xii}:

Translator: So where did you learn this then?

A: Well, since I was a child in my childhood maybe on television, for example, I would watch, or in weddings.

Translator: So, at weddings and on TV you learned something?

A: So before, in those days, there wasn't TV.^{xiii}

Translator: So before there was TV then how did you learn?

B: Well you would go to a wedding, engagements and there would be dancing there.

Translator: So you didn't have a guru to teach you.

B: No, we didn't have a teacher. (Anonymous Interview, 14 June 2013)

Throughout the course of my interviews with Chokhi Dhani performers, this family stands out as an exception. They did not grow up in the tradition of Kalbeliya dance—a dance form heavily connected to a specific tribe in a specific region—but rather discovered through their role as audience members that it could be a lucrative profession. Already, this complicates the question of an “authentic” performance space, as no traditional practitioner would claim authenticity in learning dance steps from the television. But is that fair? These performers were quite comfortable in their identity as Kalbeliya dancers, and expressed a continued commitment to becoming better, stating “We are always trying to improve it [the dancing].” Would we dismiss a self-taught performer if they weren't situated in the context of cultural heritage? Why does authenticity become so important when tradition and heritage are a part of the equation, and what, in the end, does an “authentic” performance require?

In direct contrast to the first interview, my second interaction with a dance troupe at Chokhi Dhani was one steeped in ancestral ties and family tradition. Although this family also claimed to practice Kalbeliya dance, they were present at Chokhi Dhani to perform Rajvari Ghoomar. The term “Rajvari” indicates an association with courtly activities, and indeed upon further research I discovered a connection between Ghoomar and the royal women of Jaipur's court:

The popular Ghoomar Dance in Rajasthan India is the characteristic dance of the Bhil tribe. However, it is largely associated with the royal ladies of Jaipur, who perform it on certain auspicious occasions. The Kachhwaha Clan of Rajputs who ruled Jaipur, defeated the Bhils and later acceded to a peaceful coexistence. It is

therefore normal that the royalty would pick up some of the Bhil traditions and practices. The Ghoomar dance is essentially a women's dance performed by the women for exclusively ladies' gatherings. The women performing the Ghoomar Dance Rajasthan dance in circles. (“Ghoomar Dance, Rajasthan”)

This particular troupe had been with Chokhi Dhani for twenty-three years, essentially since the beginning of the attraction’s history. When asked what they did before their time at Chokhi Dhani, the patriarch of the clan (a much larger family than the first) responds, “I was always doing this”, a very literal representation of the more colloquial “I was born to do this”, as he and all his family members were, in fact, born into the traditional dances they showcase as part of the Chokhi Dhani atmosphere.

And from this interaction emerged a pattern. The majority of performers at Chokhi Dhani were born into their professions, and almost all of them have been working for the attraction since its inception, with responses ranging from 20 years of employment at Chokhi Dhani to 23 years in most cases. Strains and variations on “I was always doing this” were repeated throughout my interactions with the performers, painting a generational portrait of performers born into and carrying on the work of their forefathers^{xiv} in a committed, long-term environment. One would presume then, that the attachment to a performance genre comes from these ancestral ties, making the example of the Kalbeliya troupe from Indore all the more compelling. When asked about the continuation of their craft and the future of their art forms, the troupes steeped in ancestral tradition gave responses based on their children as the future of the art form. This practitioner of chopaal^{xv} had this to say about his performance genre’s continued importance:

My father and grandfather did this only, and I will stay in this line of work only, but I will keep trying to improve it. This is my living, I can't do something else. And my children are also going into this, they are singing and playing, even as children. So if it somehow became less successful, I would do something to try to improve it [not do something else]. So if I became unsuccessful, I would try to make sure that I send my children outside [of Jaipur]. I have five children.

(Anonymous Interview, 15 June 2013)

That his children are already entering into the same career as their parents is indicative of a wider pattern among the dancers and musicians of Chokhi Dhani. In many cases, the children were already the main performers, with the matriarch or the patriarch of the clan assuming the role of instructor and conductor rather than “star” of the troupe, as they might have been in days past. This familial connection is, in the cases of the performers that grew up in the tradition, the link to a secure future for their identities as performers. But when we return to the group from Indore, something else happens. Yes, their daughters are already learning the art form, but that is not where the heart of their response to a question about the continuation of Kalbeliya:

A: It'll keep changing.

B: Yeah, it'll keep changing.

A: **Yes, it will keep changing, but it won't end.**

B: As things go forward it will keep going.

A: That's right. [Unintelligible] When I become old, someone will follow me and I'm teaching this one [indicates one of her daughters]. (Anonymous Interview, 14 June 2013)

In this answer, a new element to the identity of dance-based performance comes into play. The performers recognize that their art form as it has been traditionally practiced is not sustainable if

it remains static and unchanging. Perhaps this comes from the additional perspective of having learned Kalbeliya as outsiders, but the quote resonates with the experience of the other dancers at Chokhi Dhani on an integral level that went unnoticed until I could fully comprehend the transcriptions.

Kalbeliya dancers have long faced changes to their art form. With the implementation of the 1972 Wildlife Protection Act^{xvi}, the slow and irregular policing of the practice of snake charming became a catalyst for change in the performances of the Kalbeliya desert tribes (Bagla, n.p.). It does not go unmentioned in my interviews with Chokhi Dhani performers, with the Ghoomar troupe specifically referencing the government's disallowance of any type of snake charming as public performance as a reason for the dances they practice now. What this indicates in relation to the response of the Indore group is a need among dancers to be constantly adaptive in the way they approach their art, in total contradiction to the perceived "authenticity" of Kalbeliya, now outlawed in its original form. This presents the dancers of Chokhi Dhani with the unique acceptance of change as a constant in their practice of their art form, manifesting for some performers in simpler terms, like a change in movement vocabulary, or for others, like the group from Indore, a complete change of career and lifestyle. Is dance then, more able to adapt to the needs of tourists in an age of cultural heritage tourism? Is it easier to perform "authenticity" with songs and movement that can be reconfigured for shorter programs without sacrificing the original style of the art form?

I would argue that yes, the dancers and musicians were overall more able to adapt. Just looking at the answers they gave to questions about the future of their art form is indication that they are less concerned with its continuation than they with the improvement of their craft. This doesn't by any means indicate that folk dance forms are not facing some degree of struggle.

While in India I was fortunate enough to meet with acclaimed international Kalbeliya celebrity Gulabo, so famous in and around her home state that she need only use her first name. Gulabo's resilience is astounding: buried alive for hours when she was just a baby in an attempt by her family at female infanticide, Gulabo used her talent as a dancer to expand her career on an international platform, touring in Europe as a cultural ambassador for Rajasthan and making celebrity appearances on popular Indian television show *Big Boss*. Despite all of this success, Gulabo had some revealing insights into her people's complex relationship with the Indian government:

Today, Kalbeliya dance is very well known. But if you look behind it, my people are very poor. You might not think that Gulabo could live in a house that isn't even wired to have a fan. So my name is well known but my price has not risen that much. So I don't earn that much more than a laborer. So I come and I do a dance program, and I manage to get by on that. And the government does not help...the government doesn't do anything at all. Here I have actually helped promote the name of Rajasthan and the name of the Rajasthan government in the whole world. In the functions when I do Kalbeliya dance, there's no function and no fair when you don't have Kalbeliya dance. (Gulabo, Interview, 26 June 2013)

Later on in the interview, Gulabo revealed her plans for a dance school for young girls, a partially realized dream with a 5-acre plot of land and lessons she currently conducts in her house. Here too an intriguing point was made: "I really want to get the school made, it's really important. If that doesn't happen the dance will end."

The distress expressed throughout Gulabo's impassioned interview stems from that same 1972 legislation that banned the use of snakes and wooden-reed instruments called beens^{xvii} in

the Kalbeliya dance genre. While many in government and in the West might see the ban on snake charming as a positive step for India's image and environmental track record, the lore of the Kalbeliya tribe, as dictated to me by Gulabo, indicates that snakes were the God-given right of her people, reserved for their exclusive usage by Lord Shankar—and stolen from them by the Indian government. To reveal all of this in an interview that was set up by a government entity reveals Gulabo's power as a dance celebrity, but also her frustration with the current identity of Kalbeliya in Rajasthan. The intensely political bent of the interview felt like a release of tensions, the public voice of the Kalbeliya tribe speaking out for the rights of her people. Gulabo's assertion that dance will die out without a proper school to foster the next generation of Kalbeliya practitioners is telling as well, indicating a shift in the community away from the generational method of instruction that the Chokhi Dhani dance troupes indicated they would use to pass their craft down to their children.

So why do the performers at Chokhi Dhani form their artistic identity and perception of the future around their families, while Gulabo puts the most importance on a new system of instruction and support for a people forgotten, in her words, by the government? It is worth noting again the longevity of many of Chokhi Dhani's artists' careers with the park, as most have worked there for twenty years or more. Perhaps the stability of consistent payment and meals prevents the dancers and musicians at Chokhi Dhani from forming the same perception of their identity as under threat from the institutions of government. Gulabo's chilling admissions certainly indicate that the larger Kalbeliya community faces greater threat than was indicated to me by the artists at Chokhi Dhani. But the concept of a school for Kalbeliya dance aligns in some ways with the fluidity of instruction advocated by the Kalbeliya dancers from Indore, once again indicating a willingness on the part of dancers to adapt their performance identities to fit

with the changing nature of their art. Gulabo might take a more all-or-nothing approach to the subject, but she still acknowledges a need to adapt, to survive. And having met her, I would not bet against her survival.

Section 3: The Storytellers

With the future of Rajasthani folk dancers and musicians so vehemently bolstered by their positive responses, I looked toward other genres to see if, based on my innocuous interview questions, the same result might occur. And this is when my study stumbled upon the weathering rock of Rajasthani Storytellers. Here I use “Storytellers” to refer to two forms of folk performance that are grounded in Rajasthani historical narratives. The first is the famous art of Indian puppetry, or kathputli, thought to be over one thousand years old and originally practiced in Rajasthan (Ghosh and Bannerjee 75). The immense popularity of this style of puppetry across India has given rise to its use as a national symbol of identity (Brandon and Banham 93), and the migratory nature of kathputliwalas have led to its perceived use as a “common amusement for middle class children” (Hansen 156). Kathputlis^{xviii} are marionette-style puppets constructed of wood, cloth stuffing, and metal nails, and generally range in size from between 9”-18” (Mathur 117). Generally, puppeteers in India identify with the Bhatt or Bhata caste, which in ancient times “used to be applied to professional minstrels and court poets” (116), and take their stories from famous historical ballads, the most notable of which is that of Amar Singh Rathore, a famous warrior of the Rajput dynasty operating under the rule of the famous Mughal emperor Shahjahan (Hansen 157). Amar Singh Rathore has assumed the role of a legendary folk hero in the Bhatt community, and his story informs many of the shorter skits and characters present in the kathputliwala’s repertoire. The kathputli method of storytelling is also known for the shrill

whistles and high-pitched noises that punctuate the swirling, frenetic movements of the marionettes themselves (Singh 59).

There is already an ample record of the stories told by kathputliwalas, as they are foregrounded in India's rich history and therefore of special interest to scholars in determining alternate pathways of historical narrative. Kathputli as an art form is also more well known for its use as an egalitarian method of entertainment, reaching both young and old, rich and poor with the vivid stories and humorous tone of the performances. Balwant Gorgi has a particularly striking passage about his experience of puppet shows and their effect on various groups of people:

I can only compare the hypnotic power of this medium to Walt Disney productions, which attract equally children of four and men of ninety. In puppet performances the child is attracted by the clownish fun of fantastically exaggerated movements, old men by the distilled universal wisdom...and young folk are tickled by the subterranean currents which link the performances with the social realities of their lives. The puppet-master's humorous and satirical comments always connect the past to the present, the dead to the living, the puppets to humans... (75)

This might seem like an exaggeration on Gorgi's part, but perhaps the most consistent component of my observations at Chokhi Dhani was the popularity of the puppeteer's performances. The crowds for the dancers were of a more casual interest, whereas any time the kathputli stage area filled with the raucous sounds of whistles and shouts, huge swaths of the park's visitors would crowd around, completely enthralled by the ten-fifteen minute presentation of a Rajah and his Rani, followed by magic tricks and balancing acts performed by the

puppeteer's precocious son. It didn't take any stretch of the imagination to assume that such a popular artist would have a positive outlook for the future of his craft. But like so many assumptions on the part of the foreign ethnographer, this was proved to be deeply incorrect.

Chokhi Dhani's puppeteer, much like the dance and music troupes, has been with the park since its inception twenty-three years ago. He and his son perform more frequently than others in the park, due to the popularity of the performance style, but unlike the dancers and musicians interviewed, there are no indications in his responses of a positive attitude in changing the way that puppetry is presented to the public. Rather, there is a powerful sense of loss:

Those stories are finished; there is no one to listen to them any more. Because in a movie they sing and dance and in six or seven minutes it's done. No one is ready to hear more than that. **These [puppet] stories are for three days and three nights.** These are not three-hour stories; they are three days and three nights.

(Anonymous Interview, 17 June 2013)

When asked about his son's future in the art form, the puppeteer gave one of only two responses out of twenty-two interviews that indicated he would like him to do something besides continue on in the family performance discipline:

...it's like this, that the matter has finished. This is no longer done now. The thing is that it is only done in hotels. If you want to do it somewhere else, you can't. It won't be wanted. I want that my kids to study and learn to do something else. Like an engineer, become something else. I don't want them to do this work. I want them to work in some agency...or become an engineer... as much as we do now, they know how to do it. But they can't keep doing it, [also implication is that

the old art is already lost, that he has not taught it to them]. So it's only me that knows that [the full version of the stories]. (Anonymous Interview, 17 June 2013)

Here we see an identity formed around the “authentic” version of the stories, and that authentic version becoming obsolete. The Chokhi Dhani puppeteer has adapted to his modern audience’s shorter attention span in order to fit within the model of the park’s performance rotations, but there is no acceptance of this transition as a part of the art form itself. Rather, the three days and three nights that it would take to tell a traditional Rajasthani epic are the true version of the art in his mind, but no one is “ready” to hear them. The art of puppetry is then portrayed as a past tense, already forgotten by the next generation in favor of modern forms of entertainment and more lucrative careers and, in his opinion, rightly so.

In contrast to this perception of outmoded performance identity is Raju Bhatt, the local leader of the Jaipur puppet makers’ colony. His success in Rajasthan and across India has made him a leader in the Bhatt community, where his revenue as a practitioner of kathputli theater has made it possible to establish a home for his previously nomadic extended family and tribe. Bhatt opened his own home to me and my translator as part of his relationship with the Rajasthan Department of Tourism. As I sat on the bed, fielding questions from curious children and returning the shy smiles of those who were too timid to speak up (inwardly sympathizing with their dilemma—I was a shy kid too), Bhatt extolled the virtues of puppetry and even offered a practical demonstration of the way that puppets are built.^{xix} The excitement in his voice was infectious, and I noticed the contented smiles of my translator and tour guide as Bhatt launched into the mythology of Amar Singh Rathore—his people’s hero, and (perhaps not coincidentally) his favorite story to perform.

But in relating the stories of his repertoire, Bhatt revealed another significant part of today's puppet culture, and a relationship to the government that could not be more different than the one described by Gulabo.^{xx} As a partner with the Department of Tourism, Bhatt has written and performed educational kathputli shows dealing with the polio vaccine, HIV/AIDS prevention, family planning, and Indian life insurance policies, all with the express purpose of informing rural communities about otherwise unpopular or unknown measures that could potentially better their quality of life. Bhatt is equally eager to bring out the puppet he made of Michael Jackson^{xxi} and relate to us his interpretation of Harry Potter for foreign tourists' amusement. In a converse parallel to the Kalbeliya group from Indore that learned traditional dances from the television, Bhatt tells me that he learned about Harry Potter from watching the movies on TV, and used that to inform his puppet shows. Bhatt speaks a potpourri of languages, including English, Spanish, French, and German, all of which he incorporates into his interactions with audiences, depending on their nationality. Here is a man who has adapted to the new demands on puppetry like no other. And yet, what is the first thing he mentions, at the very beginning of the interview? "Puppetry...it is dying."

The majority of the interview after this point is dedicated to the stories themselves^{xxii}, but there are clues that this extremely adaptive performer still ties his identity in with the older methods of kathputli performance. When describing the puppets that he designs to look like celebrities, Bhatt makes sure to emphasize that they "can just stand up, it doesn't have the talent, what can it do, it can give a speech, or it can show a little of its dance, that's all. So our puppets, that are traditional puppets, there are none to compare." Later on, he laments the fact that tourists ask him why Indians are not proud of their puppetry tradition, trailing off with "It is my wish that..." before launching into a description of how much more prevalent kathputli performances

were fifty years ago. Conjecture is a dangerous game, but I don't think it is too far reaching to hear the similarities between Raju Bhatt and the puppeteer at Chokhi Dhani. Both, in some capacity, are mourning for a previous version of their art form, even though they have both adapted—and, in Bhatt's case, adapted extremely well—to the changing desires of their audience. Did tourism destroy kathputli? No. But it has certainly rebuilt the genre into a type of performance that would be almost inconceivable in its earlier form. And with that re-envisioning of puppetry for the modern audience comes, in the hearts and minds of the performers, a sense of the past as a prized possession, to be rekindled in anecdotes and pared down retellings of the glorious exploits of Amar Singh Rathore.

Naturally there is a word for this sense of loss: nostalgia. All too familiar to Western audiences, nostalgia has the dangerous duality in the context of the Rajasthani performer's life as both a negative experience—mourning the loss of certain forms of tradition—and a positive one, in the connections that nostalgia forms with the tourism-generated audience. While the performers speak to me of the versions of stories that are no longer told, they are at the same time providing a positive nostalgic experience for their audience—recalling the past and losing a part of it at the same time. Gorgi's connected his ardent childhood love of puppetry with Walt Disney, arguably one of the most powerful nostalgic forces in Western contemporary culture today. Is puppetry intrinsically bound up with this bittersweet emotion? Does a puppet show always echo the past, even when it deals with present issues? Could this be why the storytellers narrate a greater negative impact on their art form than the musicians and dancers? This throws the role of tourism in the lives of these performers into further flux—it will always be a nebulous entity, verging in positive and negative directions to build up and destroy, change and preserve, recall and forget.

The second storytelling performance genre hailing from Rajasthan is one of the more amusing adventures in miscommunication that I experience during my stay. They are one of the last groups left to interview at Chokhi Dhani, a group of old men in the same traditional dress worn by the tour guides, but it must be said, wearing it with a more languid ease than their younger administrators. They describe their brand of musical storytelling as stemming from a deity, referred to by the group as Tejaji Maharaj. It is at this point that the Rajasthani dialect in which they are speaking becomes an insurmountable barrier to my translator. Although he does his best, the storytellers present the mythology surrounding Tejaji to us in a flowery, poetic dialect of Rajasthani that has very few roots to conventional Hindi. The translator initially tells me that the story is about a snake that bites a cow, while my transcriber later on in the process is certain that the story centers around a snake that is on fire. It is only through Wikipedia, of all places, that a reliable description of Tejaji clears up the confusion present in my transcribed interviews with the men:

Veer Teja or Tejaji was a legendary Rajasthani folk hero. He is considered one of the major eleven incarnations of Lord Shiva and worshipped as a deity in rural Rajasthan....There are a number of different variations to the Teja legend as recounted by different bards and priests. However there are four main elements to the legend that are included in most stories: Teja setting off on a perilous journey to fetch his wife from her parents home in response to a taunt by his sister-in-law (elder brother's wife), Teja risking his life to protect the cows of a lower caste woman from bandits, this is a revolutionary aspect of the legend, **Teja bravely fulfilling a vow to a snake at the cost of his own life...**(Dhali 229)

Because of the difficulty my translators and I had in understanding the performance mythology surrounding these disciples of Tejaji, it is perhaps not surprising that their outlook on the future of Tejaji storytelling is bleak, and almost darkly satirical:

TRANS: Will there be other singers like you? Will others learn in the future?

A: No, this performance is coming to an end.

TRANS: So it's ending?

A, B, and C: (Laughter) Yeah, nobody knows this anymore. We are the ones that know this.

TRANS: Are you teaching anybody this?

B: No, the kids are all studying, nobody understands this. They're all studying. No one wants to learn (this art form).

TRANS: Oh, they all want to go to America?

ALL (interrupting each other): (Laugh) Yeah, they all want to go to America.

You're saying the truth.

TRANS: So you're not going to teach your children?

C: There might be a boy who is dumb [as in unintelligent or not very good at studies] and I could teach him. (Anonymous Interview, 18 June 2013)

Although these men were happy to talk at length about their craft and passionate in their characterization of their deity Tejaji, this is by far the most cynical response from an artist that I received over the course of these interview sessions. There are no illusions here of passing stories on to the next generation, perhaps because “the kids” are increasingly growing abroad, and perhaps because the pure Rajasthani dialect in which their story is performed is no longer translatable to Indian or non-Indian audiences, as even our Rajasthani guide as difficulty

explaining the mythology of Tejaji. I got the distinct feeling that tourism operates in a less hospitable manner when vocal language is the primary means of performance. Dancers, musicians, and even puppeteers have visual stimuli to rely on for connecting with heritage tourism audiences, but these men have only their words, and perhaps, if one comes along, “a boy who is dumb” to share them with.



The Storytellers, Chokhi Dhani, June 2013

IV. Monsoon Season

I am in Mumbai, staying with a cousin and transcribing interviews.

Mumbai is a coastal city, and the rains come in heavy and thick and long, as if they begin somewhere above the Earth and go right down to its very core. The sound as it issues forth from some yawning cavity in the canvas of grey clouds is like the softest whisper and the loudest drum you can imagine. I can't look away.

Where the heat slowed my thoughts, the rain leaves nothing but thoughts behind. I feel guilty about something, but I couldn't tell you what.

Where the heat blinded me, the rain opens my eyes. I've never seen anything so green as India after the rains. I don't think the US has a green quite like that. The monsoon is making me wax rhapsodic, awakening in my some preadolescent urge to swan around in long dresses and pretend to me some ancient heroine of a forgotten city.

I settle for playing make believe with my niece and nephew. School is cancelled because the ocean has flooded the roads near it so badly that the water would go over their heads if they attempted to wade through it.

While in Mumbai, I read a non-fiction account of the slums that give the city its unfortunate nickname, "Slumbai." I wonder how many peoples' homes will be washed away in the flooding. I feel guilty for wondering, in my cousin's comfortable high-rise. I feel guilty for everything.

"What are you thinking about? Missing home?"

Section 4: The Present and Future Performer

Although the performers themselves speak with clarity of vision for the future of their artistic practice (be it positive or negative), the actual presentation of their performances on the part of Chokhi Dhani is a more muddled version of linear time and reality. In speaking with park officials, it became evident that the park placed its performers in the precarious position of being simultaneously within the present and the past. My interviews with management revealed a sense of chronological division between the urban population of Jaipur and the performers' roles in recreating village life. One manager in particular had this to say:

We have the concept of a village, so the village atmosphere is a little far away from the people, so they just wanted to be a part of the villagers [sic]. They feel that they are just like India...get in touch with this atmosphere, they are looking for it, their children are looking for it, they are looking for the kind of things they had in that era [sic]. This place is also [a popular educational place]...The teachers guide them that this is a complete village, everything is here. But main motto is to provide entire complete Rajasthani atmosphere. **We are going far away from the original culture**...Problem is the kids. They are living in the cities, visiting malls and everything, eating burgers and everything. (Anonymous Interview, 20 June 2013)

The implication that these performers are the “original” culture places them firmly in the past, in direct contrast to the general assertions on the part of the folk practitioners that these performances constitute “their daily bread.” Could the physical placement of these performer’s bodies within a space that recalls an atmosphere that is “a little far away from the people” be part

of the reason behind the increased reliance on tourism that folk performers are experiencing today in Rajasthan? If the performers are the return to “original culture,” the nostalgic force that fosters a connection for urban families with the “real” India, is there any way to reconcile folk performers’ identities as career-oriented individuals invested in the continuation of their practice?

Another quote caught my attention when looking over the transcripts from these administrative interview sessions. A section of one interview, with the park’s general manager, dealt with the question of what Chokhi Dhani performers would be doing if the attraction didn’t exist. Amongst the examples of hotels and weddings that Rajasthani performers generally use as a source of income, the most amazing line slipped into the conversation:

B: Yeah, that’s what they would do. There are lots of other hotels opening.

If it was not the case that Chokhi Dhani opened, there are many other hotels. There are many functions of very large weddings and the people go there.

TRANS: But that life—

B: **But that time has gone by. The time of the kings.** So they go to these weddings, but not as much as they used to. There’s not as much work as there used to be. (Anonymous Interview, 20 June 2013)

“The time of the kings” was thousands of years ago, and yet in the mind of this particular park official, that is where these performances belong. Is it possible that this is how most of India feels about folk performance identity? Or is the relationship between tourism and folk performance a signifier on the part of the Indian economy that there is a place for these arts, and that place is firmly within a nostalgia-based system of fragmented, constructed recollection? This

question burned into me, and became a source of frustration—this was the last interview I conducted at Chokhi Dhani before my gateway of access closed. What kind of information could I have attained had I been able to address the performers again, and ask them how they felt about their artwork being associated in a very permanent way with the past instead of the future? Would they be indifferent, or would a different narrative emerge of the folk performer's experience in the changing landscape of Indian cultural heritage? At what point is it exploitative to place the historical identity of an entire nation on the backs of particular cultural expressions and the groups who practice them?

But there was not time to return to these questions. My days at Chokhi Dhani were up, and I, the Hindi-less researcher, did not yet know what my interviewees had responded to my questions with. The overwhelming sense that I had failed them, that I continue to fail them, haunted the transcription process. If only I had known Hindi, I could have reached deeper into these conversations, perhaps established connections that would provide answers to the questions that arose in the transcription process. I didn't feel I could safely conclude this chapter in my work with so much left untouched, so many avenues left untraveled.

But regrets aside, the ethnographic challenge presents itself—is “conclusion” the productive end to a portrait of such variation and complexity? How do the intricacies of these interviews present themselves as cohesive links in a larger narrative? Embarking on this journey, I was under the impression that ethnographies followed a clear trajectory towards an ending, but here that was not the case my any means. How was I to reconcile all the conflicting narratives I had been given to work with? My project became not a straight line, but rather a series of overlapping circles, gently ensconcing each other one moment, before rolling away the next to reveal chasms of irreconcilable idiosyncrasies.

But perhaps that is what ethnography can do for us, as readers and researchers and observers of art. I entered into my research question with a set understanding that tourism would be “bad” for the performer. But to what end is that a necessary judgment to place on this interaction? In my time in Jaipur, I recognized passion, endurance, and adaptability in all the performers I was able to speak to. Even the disciples of Tejaji, cynical as they were about the prospects of their story in the future, had transitioned into the tourist industry and operated there successfully for over two decades. And therein lies the discovery that I, as a pedantic, inexperienced researcher (compounded with hang-ups about my own connections to India) needed to make. Although their interaction with tourism can be seen as the inevitable and increasingly dominant relationship within the folk performance community, the fluidity of the artists themselves is the real discovery of this study. Yes, the “time of the kings” has gone by, but the artists associated with that time refuse to remain within it. I am reminded of the words of a Ghoomar musician, who—in the midst of explaining the concept of “ragas”, or song structures, surrounded by his family, with a dusky orange sun fading into the background as the park prepared for another night of performances—let slip this gem of a sentence:

“It will just keep going through time.”

“Through time.” Not of time. And that is the true indicator of the performer’s longevity in Rajasthan—they are out of time, and thus able to travel within it, from the past to the future, for the present, and for themselves.

V. The Pink City One More Time

She spots my mother's white skin from a mile off and identifies us, correctly, as the tourists to perform for.

I feel my tourist identity sinking in even further, negating my time as a "real" Indian. My hybridity gives me neither the freedom nor the permission to perform my Indian self or my American self. I wonder if there will ever be two reconciled parts of me that make a whole, or whether I will forever describe myself in fractions, forgetting to allow for more than "half this, half that" when constructing my identity. I wonder all this in the span of time between when the dancer notices us and when the performance begins. I wonder all of this every day that I am in this country, and every day since my return.

Her troupe ushers themselves over, smiling and calling to us to make requests. They play American songs. First "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star", and then Shakira's global soccer anthem "Waka Waka" waft through the garden as we eat our meal.

My sister and my mother are suitably enchanted. A Kalbeliya in her colorful mirrored skirt, stacked silver bangles and sparkling black head scarf is truly a magnificent sight, all elegance and sinuous beauty as she twists and turns, flexing elegant fingers in snake-like movements in time to the music.

But I can't help but feel embarrassed. I just spent a month speaking with dancers just like her and her family, but here I am, back in the role of wealthy tourist, just perhaps a little more knowledgeable than most. I feel self-conscious of the work that I've done. Is my research just another brand of tourism? Is it such a bad thing to be a more informed tourist? Perhaps not. I look down at my food until the music stops.

The dance ends. My mother tips well, as the dancer knew she would. A group of well dressed men, all tailored suits and leather loafers, enter smoking cigars and sit down at the bar for the Indian upper-class' new favorite drink: Johnny Walker Black Label. The manager of the restaurant comes over to the dancer.

The men have asked her to come and perform for them. She gives us a quick smile and walks off across the lawn to where the group is sitting in a semi-circle, waiting in expectation of her serpentine choreography. It looks increasingly like the 1960s across the field.

Something about this experience stays with me, haunting me all the way back to the United States. Why did it feel so different from the dancers at Chokhi Dhani, or from my long interview with Gulabo? It is the same industry, the same "heritage"—why does it bother me still?

We finish our dinner. Tomorrow we leave Jaipur for New Delhi. And soon I will be home.

Wending our way up the stairs to our hotel room...

“She was so beautiful. Her skirt looked like it was made of stars.”

“Is that the kind of performance you’ve been researching?”

I don’t know what to say.

The Subaltern Voice of the Folk Performer (Limitations)

One of the most critical steps that academia can take to free itself from the stereotype of the “Ivory Tower” is to fully acknowledge the perils of ethnographic study in each work presented in that vein. I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the constant presence of administrators and tourism industry officials during my interviews with performers who depend on the tourism industry for their livelihood with increasing and irrevocable frequency. There is no way to know, in some instances, if their responses were what they genuinely felt or if they felt pressured by the presence of a young American girl peppering them with questions that, at times, didn’t even make sense within their identities.

Over and over again, I was praised by these performers for spreading the name of Rajasthan far and wide, for doing “important work” for their region. There was one chopaal player in particular who could not stop expressing his excitement over the idea that his interview and, more importantly, his art form, would be publicized in a Western setting. His refrain of “This is so great” takes up the bulk of the page of his first interview. And what artist would not take pride in their work, and in the ability to share it with a larger audience than before? Here then, is the space where I call into question the anonymity of these performers. What benefit does it serve them to not ask and record their names, to treat them just as I would any performer on the Western stage? A performance does not benefit from anonymity. The audience is meant to engage, to recognize, and to seek out the art form represented. How can proper agency be imbued on an identity-less voice? Is it really in the best interests of those who participated in this study to remain anonymous, or is that a marker of safety that does not translate from Western laboratories into Indian amusement parks?

When I asked performers “Do you think it is important that this work continue?” there was often the confusion that comes with a question that doesn’t require answering in the minds of the interviewee. “Important” in particular did not translate well conceptually, and oftentimes the reaction was that the importance or relevance of their work was never in question in the first place. Their job, no matter how performative and culturally significant, was still their job. It is, for many of the performers I interviewed, the life that they were born into and the only one that they conceived of living. Questioning whether it is important that their work continue ended with many performers referring to their art as “their daily bread,” a reference I initially found confusing. After the fact, I wondered if this was because I was seeing the question through a longer progression of time and the tourist industry, and some of the performers that I interviewed saw the question through the lens of their day-to-day lives. In retrospect, it feels like a very exclusionary interview tactic, to try to force a particular word into conversation with someone for whom it means very little. Lesson learned.

Limitations also exist in the translation of the interviews conducted. Not every nuance or colloquial turn of phrase can come across in a casual conversation being translated from Hindi to English, and there are variations upon variations of interpretation for certain aspects of the interviews recorded. As with any ethnographic endeavor, I attempt to use the multifaceted nature of language and its meanings to create multiple pathways of perspective, but the “lost in translation” factor must be acknowledged regardless.

Still also remains the ever-present question of Gayatri Spivak, lurking in the back of any South Asian Studies researcher: “Can the subaltern speak?” Fully acknowledging the limitations of the study, I think it is better to ask Partha Chatterjee’s question of “How is the subaltern represented?” I hope, in this study, that the folk performers I interviewed come across as in

control of their identities as performers, and in touch with the changing needs of an ever more omnipresent heritage tourism industry. It saddens me that I am unable to give their names due recognition here, based on the limitations put in place by the IRB, as anonymity raises deep concerns about proper representation and agency for my study participants. I understand the reasoning behind the protective measures required for this research to be made available to the public, but question every day whether it is time to move away from those measures for research conducted within performance studies and outside of the Western context. Will my work serve as just another example of academia reaping the benefits of a marginalized community for notoriety and scholarly fame? Or perhaps I put too much stock in my own identity as an observer and researcher. Perhaps I have faded out of the lives of these performers in a way that leaves no mark at all.

It is my wish that readers of this thesis keep these conflicts in mind while assessing my work, and continue to question and improve the role ethnography plays in the life of its subjects.

Recommendations

It is my recommendation, as the author of this work, that the conclusions present here be drawn out and strengthened by a narrowed focus on one specific discipline of Rajasthani folk performance (i.e. Kalbeliya, Ghoomar, kathputli, etc.) and further ethnographic research conducted in remote areas where performances still take place, but tourism does not play as large a role in determining the “authenticity” of the acts performed. Through this narrowed focus and more intimate experience with a performance discipline outside the bounds of carefully curated tourist spaces, contrasts in style and attitudes about the future of the art form might emerge and form a more complete pattern of identity for folk performance in Rajasthan. Attendance at popular festivals, like the Elephant Festival or Pushkar Mela, might also help in gaining further insight into the role that folk performers play in maintaining a cultural rhetoric and national identity for a changing India.

The role of caste and religion in these performance genres cannot be understated, and it would be my wish as the Primary Investigator on this piece that those areas be explored more thoroughly through additional interview questions regarding the subject matter and history of caste and religion in the work of each individual performer. The nuance required to address the caste system within the thesis in its current form is, in my opinion, beyond the scope of the current ethnographic fieldwork to complete.

Appendix A

(All images are authors own; appear courtesy of Chokhi Dhani Group, all rights reserved)



Fig. 1, Ferris wheel, Chokhi Dhani



Fig. 2, toy stall



Fig. 3, performance dais



Fig. 4, "Please do not encourage tips" sign, similar signs throughout the park ground

Appendix B
(Puppet appears courtesy of Raju Bhatt)



Fig. 1, kathputli designed to resemble Michael Jackson, with puppet assembly process depicted in background



Fig. 2, traditional kathputli, used for Rajput histories and love stories

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Notes

ⁱ Mehndi is the Hindi word for “henna”, a plant that can be dried, ground up, and formed into a paste for body decoration. It is traditionally used on hands, feet, and hair for beautification purposes and significant social occasions, such as weddings.

ⁱⁱ One passage in particular from the product manual given to me by the Ministry of Tourism stands out as indicative of the Rajasthani identity as shaped by cultural markers: “Today, little in Rajasthan has changed because the history that was its past is inextricably linked to its present... Which is why, sometimes, when the wind sings, and the sands shift, and the voice of a passing minstrel finds an echo in the halls of a deserted palace, it is easy to imagine oneself transported into an age long ago when even fairy tales might have been true.” (Singh 5)

ⁱⁱⁱ And, on a less publicized level, Rajah-mandated sexual edification.

^{iv} This section alludes to the Rajasthan’s role in the Mughal Empire during the pre-colonial era. The region was dominated by the ruling Rajput class, who “regarded themselves as descendants of the Kshatriya [warrior] class” (“Rajputs”). Stories of their battles and partnerships with Mughal emperors make up a large part of regional folklore, as well as serving as the basis for some of the main tourist attractions in the area. Their dominance over the region has also given Jaipur the sometimes moniker of “The City of Kings,” because of its importance to both Mughal and Rajput historical influence.

^v In attempting to define what “true” heritage is the argument often becomes a debate about authenticity. Meethan acknowledges the scholars who blame modernity for the collapse of some pre-existing, ideal form of culture, but at the same time dismisses their claims, instead defining authenticity as “a constructed value or set of values, [which] cannot be accounted for without considering the social and material contexts in which it is located.” (95) This definition of authenticity will serve the purposes of this study, in that it is acknowledged to be “constructed” and not irrevocable fact.

^{vi} *Kurta pajama* is a traditional outfit consisting of a long-sleeved, high-necked tunic and coordinating loose pants that constitute traditional menswear in many parts of India. *Bandhani* is an intricate style of tie-dye famously associated with the Rajasthani region. Bandhani turbans done in yellows, reds, and greens are markers of traditional Rajasthani folk culture (and naturally available for purchase at any tourist-tailored bazaar stall in Jaipur). In general, Indian men in the Jaipur area and throughout the country no longer dress in traditional styles, preferring the ease of care and affordability of polyester-blend office wear. Although this is a topic for a different

thesis altogether, it is often the case that lower-class men will wear cheaply made Western-style clothing, while upper-class Indian men are more likely to sport tailor-made *kurta pajama*—a commentary on perceptions of national masculine identities through clothing, for another time.

^{vii} Or, to form a better perspective, 8.1% of the total workforce (Osbourne and Kovacs 927).

^{viii} My transcriber later explained to me that “Ram ram” as a greeting would be similar to “Howdy” in the American context, for Western readers.

^{ix} See Appendix A for images of Chokhi Dhani

^x Although gravitating towards the elephant rides could be explained not by a need on the part of Western tourists for authenticity, but rather a need for “exotic” experiences.

^{xi} “Ghee” is the Hindi word for clarified butter. It is considered a staple in most Indian kitchens.

^{xii} When interviews are cited specifically in the text, performers names appear as randomly selected letters to maintain anonymity under IRB restrictions.

^{xiii} Translator’s Note: Difficult to translate into English, but the apparent subtext is that both TV and observations at weddings were used as inspiration. Slightly unclear because of disconnect between transcriber’s more “classic” Hindi and dialect spoken by performer.

^{xiv} It is essential, but incredibly difficult, to note the role of caste in this pattern of responses. Further research is required to give this area the nuance it requires to be successfully integrated into the piece. This is noted in the Recommendations section.

^{xv} A village-centric style of dance and song often played during meetings of the panchayat, (or local government), incorporates use of the *dhol*, a type of folk drum

^{xvi} The policing of which began in earnest about a decade ago, in 2000 (Bagla, n.p.)

^{xvii} Beens are the type of wooden reed instrument used to “charm” the snakes. Gulabo talked at length about the lost art of crafting and playing beens, as “only an old man can know how to teach it and make it.” The problem with been playing in Kalbeliya performance troupes lies in their inherent connection to snake charming, the (controversially) banned component of the Kalbeliya performance genre—Gulabo explained that “Without the snake, what is the point of playing the been?” But throughout the interview, Gulabo presented the been as an integral connection to past forms of Kalbeliya, saying “the girls [as in the younger generation of Kalbeliya dancers] don’t need it, but without the been, I [Gulabo] cannot dance...I have taken the place of the snake in my dance.” There is a subtle implication in this part of the interview that her need for the been to be played during performance is the “true” Kalbeliya, and she the original and most authentic practitioner. Here also she echoed a need for a school that would teach young people the art of making and playing the been, not necessarily because they needed it, but because otherwise it would be forgotten. This is a departure from the more lenient conception of Kalbeliya presented at Chokhi Dhani, but Gulabo did relent, telling me she “doesn’t mean to criticize these people [performers at Chokhi Dhani], as they too have to earn their daily bread.”

^{xviii} Literally meaning “puppets” in Hindi, loosely translated.

^{xix} Although he stressed that the puppets they build on a daily basis are meant for tourist purchase only. The puppets used for performances are sometimes as much as eighty years old, and take considerably longer to construct and decorate.

^{xx} Although, in a compelling case for a paradigm shift towards folk-centric education, Bhatt also advocated for a school of puppetry, so that he might be able to pass the tradition on more easily to others. As a researcher, it is tempting to delve into questions of what the institutionalizing of “folk” education might do for puppetry and Kalbeliya as genres of performance—would it lend

them the same “high-brow” credibility as bharata natyam or katakhali? Or would stratifications of popular vs. artistic performance emerge along the same lines as before?

^{xxi} See Appendix B.

^{xxii} Raju Bhatt’s relation of the story of Amar Singh Rathore, narrated to me in English:

[*Tells story of Amar Singh Rathore and how he met the Rajah and the Rajah gave him water. He was so grateful that he swore an oath...*] [Struggles with English so switches to Hindi:] “O king, wherever your sweat falls, there will I give my blood.” So he made that kind of vow. Then, as Rajah Rathore Singh made war in the Agra fort, all of his [untranslated]. He betrayed him— his brother in law. As Rajah Amar Singh Rathore came into the fort, into Agra fort, he was in front. His brother-in-law betrayed him. His brother in law stabbed him in the back. He had put his foot in the door first. And Rajah Amar Singh in falling cuts off his brother-in-law’s nose. And there “they die” [spoken in English]. After that Ram Singh came. His nephew. And he and the Pathan take him back to his own place, Nagore, and Ram Singh's aunt’s son, his own nephew, sent him. And this is the story that we tell, with puppets.